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## Three recently published dialogues between Eastern Orthodox theology and Western psychology

MICHAEL BAKKER

In a conversation, Metropolitan Kallistos Ware once mentioned three dialogues between Eastern Orthodoxy and the West that need to be engaged in. They concern the following subjects: biblical studies, natural sciences and psychology. This review article concerns the third dialogue and discusses three books on this subject that have recently been published: *The Philokalia and the Inner Life: on Passions and Prayer* by Christopher Cook (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2011), *C.G. Jung and Nikolai Berdyaev: Individuation and the Person* by Georg Nicolaus (London and New York: Routledge, 2011) and *Ancient Christian Wisdom and Aaron Beck's Cognitive Therapy: A Meeting of Minds* by Father Alexis Trader (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

Cook is an Anglican priest, consultant psychiatrist (specializing in addiction) and lectures in spirituality and pastoral studies. Nicolaus is a psychotherapist, who has degrees in philosophy and psychoanalytic studies. Fr Alexis is an Orthodox priest confessor and Athonite monk who received his PhD from the University of Thessalonica. All three authors are thus professionally involved in the psychological and/or spiritual care of souls. This also involves curing souls as Fr Alexis points out when he refers to the medical metaphor employed by the Church Fathers and modern (Greek) theologians describing Orthodox Christianity as a therapeutic science (p. 11). This practical involvement with healing suffering persons Fr Alexis finds to be one of the striking similarities between the patristic pastoral tradition and modern cognitive therapy. Cook underlines that the medical model was already employed by ancient philosophers, as Martha Nussbaum describes in *The Therapy of Desire*. This model was largely accepted by St Basil the Great, who taught that 'God's grace is as evident in the healing power of medicine and its practitioners as it is in miraculous cures.' After giving this quotation

Fr Alexis speaks about 'an enduring alliance between Christianity and classic culture including secular medicine' (p.10). He also points out that some Christians such as Tertullian rejected an alliance between Jerusalem and Athens, between the Church and the Academy, but on the whole worldly knowledge was not rejected but used by the Fathers.

Each of these three authors, who all hold PhDs, devote at the start of their studies time to this potential tension between belief and science, a tension which appears to be present in all three fields mentioned above: biblical studies (e.g., historical critical reading of the Old Testament vs. typological exegesis), natural sciences (e.g., evolution vs. creation) and psychology. Nicolaus, who is trained in (Jungian) Analytical Psychology, is aware that this type of 'psychology with soul' is regarded with suspicion by scientists, who have difficulty dealing with the ephemeral notion of a soul, a term which is also central in theology. Nicolaus does not attempt to contribute to 'contemporary scientific psychological theories of personality but rather to explore this boundary line between psychology and spirituality' (p. 1). Instead of dissecting the psyche into psychological states he takes as his point of departure *psychological experience*, which designates a 'realm beyond the Cartesian split of abstract spirit (which in philosophy leads to abstract metaphysics) and an equally abstract empiricism of sense data in science. It constitutes a sphere of its own, the sphere proper to psychology' (pp. 1-2).

Fr Alexis treats a different school of psychotherapy: Beck's cognitive(-behavioural) therapy, which he describes as follows: 'a system of therapy that attempts to reduce excessive emotional reactions and self-defeating behaviour by modifying the faulty or erroneous thinking and maladaptive beliefs that underlie these reactions' (p. 3). One of the parallels between the Fathers and cognitive therapists is, according to Trader, that both derive knowledge from experience: '[T]he church fathers, as empiricists, follow the pathway that underlies cognitive research—clinical observation followed by theoretical composition, or put differently, empiricism and then rational discourse' (p. 4). And indeed Byzantine epistemology maintains a close connection between *praxis* and *theoria*

(contemplation). The third and final stage of spiritual growth or mystagogy, *theologia*, has as solid foundation the practice of the virtues and contemplation of the *logoi* in Scripture and creation; about the knowledge mystically received during this stage the *Philokalia*, a compilation of Greek Fathers from the fourth to the fifteenth century, is largely silent. Apparently, this type of mystical knowledge is to a great extent personal(ized) and not to be passed on (we shall come back to the theme of sharing knowledge when discussing Berdyaev's epistemology).

Nicolaus extensively treats epistemology, especially in the chapter entitled '*Esse in Anima* and the Epistemology of the Heart'. That is a *post-Kantian* epistemology, for he describes how the Swiss Protestant psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung and the Russian Orthodox philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev interpret the death of metaphysics. Kant after all effected a revolution in Western thinking by demonstrating the futility of speculating about objects outside our human experience. In doing so he shifted the point of gravity from metaphysics to anthropology. 'If the God of metaphysics is dead it has to be from within the human experiential dimension that for both Jung and Berdyaev a new God-image has to take shape' (p. 83). Kant provides the basis for Jung's 'psychological religion' of which the human *animal/psyche/soul* is the ultimate reference point. Nicolaus discusses how Berdyaev interprets Kant differently and does not want to promote a new religion but offers 'a philosophically reflected formulation of a purified, spiritual Christianity in line with its mystical tradition but with a distinct anthropological basis' (p. 105). For Berdyaev the 'existential point of gravity' is not in the soul, but in the spirit; Nicolaus refers in this respect to Berdyaev's trichotomic understanding of the person as union of body, soul and spirit. This Pauline anthropological terminology shows, amongst others, that Berdyaev was firmly rooted in the (Orthodox) Christian tradition.

Before diving more into the fascinating insights offered by these books let us pause to consider some methodological difficulties. First of all, there is the problem of language and translation. Is the 'spirit' just mentioned the translation of *pneuma* or *nous*? In French the translation for both is 'esprit'; the use of 'dukh' in the titles of Berdyaev's works in Russian suggests that he was referring to the spirit (*pneuma* in Greek). The Greek Fathers in the *Philokalia*, while

not being always consistent in their terminology, generally use *nous* instead of *pneuma*. Following the English translators of the *Philokalia*, Cook translates *nous* as 'intellect' and points out that this word has a specific meaning which differs significantly from contemporary western usage (p. 152). Nicolaus' thorough comparison of Jung and Berdyaev shows that even two authors who are roughly contemporaries may very well have a different *Weltanschauung*. All three authors are aware of the methodological difficulty of comparing authors living in different ages with widely differing worldviews. Fortunately, the required prudence does not prevent them from staging three very interesting dialogues. After all, speaking to a stranger may at least help to clarify your own position. At the start of a useful chapter introducing modern psychotherapy (on p. 203) Cook asks: '[S]ome of the subjects tackled by the *Philokalia* sound very similar to the concerns of psychological medicine: Evagrius seems to be very aware of unconscious processes, *acedia* bears a marked resemblance to depression, the ensnaring hostile passions sound very much like contemporary notions of addiction, and some of the more Stoic aspects of the theory of the *Philokalia*, especially the mastery of the passions by reason, sound very akin to some forms of cognitive behavioural therapy. But do these superficial resemblances stand up to closer scrutiny?'

Fr Alexis employs the method of 'formulating patristic teachings in cognitive terms, so that the two approaches can more easily enter into dialogue' (p. 49). This is, however, not a dialogue between equal partners. In his second chapter he shows that the therapeutic practices of cognitive therapy often come with (implicit) metaphysical assumptions that are at odds with the (Eastern) Christian worldview. He therefore explicitly decides that 'the best method for making use of the Egyptian gold of cognitive therapy would involve an approach of discerning openness in which patristic teachings would be given logical priority over psychological concepts and serve as a context in which those concepts would be situated.' In the same vein Cook writes the following in his prologue: 'The subjectivity of writing is not eliminable from the text, but neither is it entirely unhelpful. Because of it, I approach the *Philokalia* with a view to being challenged by its

discourse as to the ways in which my own thoughts may better be shepherded' (p. xvii).

The image of the Lord giving intellections of the present world to man as sheep to a shepherd Cook borrows from Evagrius of Pontus and it is his controlling metaphor. In the other two books we also find many metaphors, which is in line with Berdyaev's conviction that 'the mystery of existence can only be interpreted by means of symbol and metaphor' (quoted by Nicolaus on pp. 91-92). The Russian philosopher is also quoted as saying 'thought is originally founded upon intuition, which is a personal and anthropocentric revelation of the mystery of Being' (p. 90). This is in line with the epistemology one finds in the *Philokalia*, where *nous*, intuitive intellect, takes precedence over *dianoia*, (discursive) reason. Intuitive thought has to be subjected to the laws of logic as a 'social necessity', because it has to be shared—according to Berdyaev: objective knowledge 'is in fact a unifying force in a disintegrated world' (ibid.). Nicolaus refers in this context to Pascal's 'reasons of the heart', Buber's *I and Thou* and the conception of *sobornost'* and 'integral knowledge' in Russian religious thought.

Let me now give an overview of Cook's book, whose theme is the inner life of thoughts according to the *Philokalia*. He first describes the influences on the *Philokalia* and how it was compiled. This chapter, together with the two appendices listing the works and the authors of the *Philokalia*, functions as a useful companion to the anthology. Cook takes as a reference point the English translation by G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Metropolitan Kallistos Ware of which the first volume was published in 1979 and the fifth and final volume is still awaiting publication. The chapter underlines the importance of the Desert Fathers and tradition and concludes with an observation highlighting two areas already discussed above: 'If the anthropology of the *Philokalia* is fundamentally Platonic, then surely its psychology is fundamentally Evagrian' (p. 45).

Chapters two and three focus on thoughts of a troublesome kind, the passions, and on the remedies for the passions that the *Philokalia* prescribes. These chapters contain many tables listing, for example, the eight thoughts/voices/passions and the various names given to them (table 2.1); the processes leading to passions according to Mark the Ascetic (table 2.4a), according to Maximos the Confessor (table 2.4a),

according to Hesychios the Priest, Theodoros the Great Ascetic, Symeon Metaphrasis and Ilias the Presbyter (table 2.4e); remedies against the passions in *Eight Thoughts* and *Praktikos* (table 3.1). I find these tables instructive and refreshing, although one can see the difficulty of systematizing the teaching of various authors, none of whom is always consistent in his terminology. Cook's analytical mind provides also for observations such as the description of psalmody as 'an antidote, a prophylactic medicine, or perhaps a form of cognitive therapy' (p. 137) and the following:

For them [the writers included in the *Philokalia*], the passions were a part of a world in which evil thoughts and demonic entities were not always easy to distinguish, and the quest to eliminate the passions was as much (perhaps more) theologically motivated than it was concerned with human flourishing, although of course they would not have distinguished between these aims (p. 150).

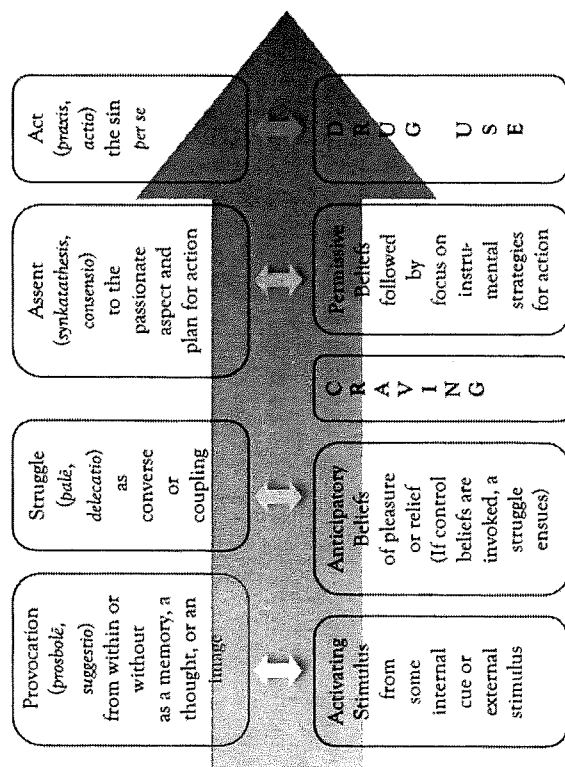
The next chapter deals with the subject of human flourishing. What is health and well-being in the perspective of the *Philokalia*, given that it contains texts exalting trials and hardships, which according to the norms of this world are to be avoided? According to Cook it concerns foremost the inner life of man and depends on participation in the life of God in Christ. He finds much wisdom about the workings of the human mind. 'These genuinely original insights have stood the test of time, even if in some cases they have been reinvented under different names' (p. 202). Of course it is interesting to contrast this ancient wisdom with the insights that the fragmented field of modern psychotherapy has to offer. In the next chapter Cook discusses the now already dated approaches of Freud and Jung (so-called dynamic psychotherapies) and their notions of ego, self, etc. He also gives an overview of now popular psychotherapies such as Beck's cognitive(-behavioural) therapy (CBT), which is currently the dominant paradigm within psychology and highly influential in clinical practice. Cook concludes this chapter with the following question:

It would appear, then, that the *Philokalia* is deeply concerned with matters which are usually considered the province of psychotherapy. Herein lies a challenge, for the world of psychotherapy exists in a post-Cartesian, post-Kantian philosophical age where dualism is frowned upon and the nature

of the subjective self is no longer universally agreed upon. How may the *Philokalia* be interpreted for this age? (p. 256).

Cook finds in the language of inwardness common ground between the 'talking cure' of psychotherapy and the 'praying cure' offered by the *Philokalia*; he constructs a conversation between both cures in his final chapter entitled 'On Thoughts and Prayer'. It focuses on the interpretation of thoughts and dreams and how the *Philokalia* challenges us to look afresh at how we interpret thoughts. Finally, in his epilogue Cook writes that the *Philokalia* 'pursues its method of therapy beyond any pathology that may be located within or behind our thoughts to a point where language and words begin to fail' (p. 300).

Fr Alexis' book is similar in its theme and methodology. With regard to Western psychology it concentrates on cognitive therapy, while as to the Eastern Orthodox tradition it does not limit itself to the *Philokalia* (together with the Desert Fathers and Evagrius) as Cook does. Fr Alexis thus has at his disposal even more Greek Fathers, including a twentieth-century elder such as Paisios the Hagiorite. He makes such abundant use of metaphors that, to my mind, it sometimes becomes distracting. We have already encountered the image of digging for Egyptian gold, that makes his Orthodox belief central and basically treats Western psychology as a quarry to be exploited. After his methodological introduction the dominant metaphors become maritime, as one can see by the titles of the chapters in Part II: 'A Patristic Voyage through the Cognitive Model'; 'A Comparative Anatomy of Psychopathology: Thoughts, Self, and Childhood'; 'The Fisherman's Art and the Scientist's Method: Two Images for Metacognition and Two Types of Education'. Fr Alexis shuttles ably between the shores of patristic pastoral care and of cognitive psychotherapy and brings some striking parallels to light. To give an impression of how he goes about this, I reproduce below from p. 135 fig. 5.1, that provides in the upper half 'the patristic stages of sin' and in the lower half 'the cognitive stages in addiction':



Fr Alexis stresses on the same page the importance of willpower as an 'active intervention by means of countering techniques such as the use of flashcards that list reasons why he should not use drugs when he is experiencing cravings.' To my mind, the issue of willpower would have been a good opportunity to introduce more of St Maximos the Confessor's teaching on the will, because it seems central in battling addiction. After all, this Father elaborated a subtle analysis of the process of human willing, inspired mostly by his struggle against the Monothelite heresy. Also in his ascetical writings, such as the *Four Centuries on Love*, there are to be found some interesting parallels with cognitive therapy. Take, for example, the importance of habits, whether bad or good, which are closely connected by cognitive therapy to repetitive behaviour and automatic thoughts. St Maximos uses Aristotelian *hexis*, which one can often translate as habit, to stress its importance in giving fixity to our decisions and supporting us when our vision is temporarily blurred. We can change an underlying belief or opinion (*gnomē* in Maximian terminology) and its concomitant disposition (*diathesis*) and behaviour by making it (temporarily) conscious.



Part III gives a first-hand account of what it is to actually work with people in need. Fr Alexis also includes a useful description of what a cognitive therapist does when treating a patient and what skills a therapist needs to have. Although he stresses that the roles of spiritual father and therapist are unmistakably different, he admits that the former may be tempted to act as amateur psychologist and the latter may be enticed to play the part of father confessor. The last part of the book concentrates on the techniques used during both approaches. Surveying the thoughts is central as one can read in a section entitled 'Patristic "Cognitive Tools" for Coping with Bad Thoughts' (pp. 199-207). The cognitive techniques against maladaptive thoughts are: exposure and analysis, disdain and rebuttal, and prayer. The therapeutic language to describe patristic tools is as refreshing as Cook's tables; it highlights how practical Christian ascetics are in dealing with thoughts, and how this endeavour is a co-operation between human nature and its Maker:

All the faculties of the tripartite soul are marshalled to action in the struggle for purity of the thoughts: desire in prayer, anger in rebuttal, and reason in analysis. And as always, the grace of God is present, healing, strengthening, and illuminating those who strive to be vigilant over their thoughts.

By contrast, the cognitive techniques are solely human-centred, but also very practical: a 'dysfunctional thought record' (DTR) describes in what situation an automatic thought (e.g., 'I will make a fool of myself') and its concomitant level of emotion ('anxiety 90%') might occur. The patient has to list on a DTR also the cognitive distortions ('catastrophizing, magnification') and the adaptive response ('I may be nervous at the beginning, but usually people respond well to me'). The card with the DTR is to be read thrice daily and kept at hand when a similar situation arises. Fr Alexis describes how Evagrius in a similar fashion provides biblical rebuttals against demonic suggestions (p. 212). The use of imagery may help to 'reconstruct schemata': St Theophan the Recluse recommended robing a naked thought in some sort of image. 'This practice is consistent with the psychological finding that images can directly introduce new patterns into the network of schemata that guide a person's responses to various situations' (p. 231).

Fr Alexis convincingly demonstrates in his book that there are many parallels between modern psychology and ancient Christian asceticism. In his last chapter, entitled 'Final Coda: The Chorus of the Fathers and the Harmonies of Cognitive Therapy', Fr Alexis repeats his warning that behind them lie different worldviews: 'For the church fathers, the brutish and childish passions are inconsistent with the divine image in man and damage his relationship with God. For cognitive therapists, primitive and juvenile schemata are simply cognitive manifestations of biological and developmental factors that are as such morally and spiritually neutral' (p. 254). He also argues that it is good to have knowledge about 'the other side': 'knowledge of cognitive therapy can help the spiritual father communicate with those who approach human problems with the psychological mindset that is prevalent in contemporary culture. Knowledge of patristic teachings can infuse the work of cognitive therapists with meaning, purpose, and moral direction, especially when treating Christian patients' (p. 259). On his final page (262), Fr Alexis goes even further by sketching the development of an 'Orthodox therapy', consisting of the 'patristic edifice' supplemented with 'useful data gathered from methodological applications of human inquiry', which could serve as a scaffolding on which related patristic teaching can be attached. 'The end result of this process would be a patristic approach to psychological disorders similar to the earlier patristic adaptations and utilization of classical philosophy.'

This brings us to Nicolaus' book whose dominant symbol appears to be the depth or abyss (of the human soul). On p. 71 we find, for instance: 'The seed of individuality slumbers in the depths of the psyche and presses towards its unfolding; for Jung it operates in mysterious ways through all the different symptoms, dreams, moods and affects which the psyche produces, and which tend to throw the superficial ego-personality out of kilter.' Jung's *Analytical Psychology* is sometimes listed as one of the depth psychologies, so this image is not surprising. In addition to depth psychology, Nicolaus also speaks of 'depth theology' when he quotes (on p. 172) Berdyaev, who argues that in order to meet God one should deepen one's personality: 'It is not by discarding the principle of personality that the absolutely Divine One can be attained, but rather by exploring the

spiritual depths of the personality which is antinomically united to the One.' So in order to enter the mystery of God one should also enter one's own mystery, darkness or depth. Berdyaev also uses spatial images. Nicolaus quotes from his work on p. 29: 'The modern soul is a divided soul, with a "subterranean psychology" unknown to the older Christian and "humanistic" consciousness.' Berdyaev also refers to the *Unground* (abyss) of Jakob Boehme, which he associates with the direct, intuitive apprehension of existential reality, beyond rationalization.

To the level of the abyss of the unconscious and the surface of consciousness is added another level when Nicolaus quotes Metropolitan Kallistos, who splits the unconscious into the subconscious and the supraconscious (on p. 24): 'The heart includes what we today tend to describe as "the unconscious". The heart, that is to say, includes those aspects of myself which I do not as yet understand, the potentialities within myself of which I am at present largely or totally unaware ... we may say that the heart is open both below and above, to the abyss of the subconscious below and the abyss of mystical supraconscious.' On pp. 80-1, Nicolaus explains that for Berdyaev the 'supraconscious' denotes the dimension of the spirit, which

becomes present in a non-objectifiable experience that goes right to the core of the person, to its existential centre. In this dimension a dialogic experience with the eternal Thou becomes possible, which provides the foundation for the freedom and integrity of the human person. His conception of the Divine-human character of the person rests on this notion of the supraconscious. Through it, the 'closed circle of psychologism' is opened.

This notion of the supraconscious differs from Jung's understanding.

The confines of a review article prevent us from going deeper into the differences between Jung and Berdyaev that Nicolaus points out. His book makes clear that Berdyaev is an important thinker who deserves the attention of Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike. Nor can we look here at the 'spiritual unconscious' that Jean-Claude Larchet, who finds Jung's teachings incompatible with Christianity, proposes in *L'inconscient spirituel* (Paris: Cerf, 2005). Nowadays many psychology departments tend to treat Freud and Jung as part of the

history of modern psychology, preferring to train students in more scientific approaches such as developmental and social psychology and, of course, cognitive therapy. Still, dialogue with them seems worthwhile, because they have so profoundly affected the thinking of modern human beings about themselves. Moreover, a fundamental question remains about whether one follows the *Philokalia* in giving precedence to the intuitive intellect (*nous*), which one could associate with the Spirit and the supraconscious, over the discursive reason (*dianoia* or *logos*), which is the instrument for scientific reasoning.

As may have become clear, I can sincerely recommend all of the three books discussed here. The respective dialogues they present show that it is profitable to let ancient Orthodox teaching engage modern psychology and Western thinking at large. They also show that the matters discussed in these dialogues concern pressing problems for human beings. Moreover, the books offer practical remedies, to come back to the medical metaphor with which we started out. I would also encourage the development of the kind of 'Orthodox therapy' that Fr Alexis proposes. To my mind this would be an ambitious but potentially very rewarding undertaking that would manifest the relevance of classical Orthodox teaching to the concerns of contemporary human kind. It would also take up the challenge put to the Christian churches by Jung in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (New York: Harcourt, 1933): to provide for those who are turning to psychotherapists, but whose suffering arises from ailments that are spiritual at heart.